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## IN SEARCH OF THE FUTURE OF THEATRE

### **Binational festival *theaterszene europa 2010* in Cologne an interview with Dieter Kobboldt and Tim Mrosek**

*theaterszene europa* is a binational festival organized by studiobühneköln, a theater that functions independently under the administration of the University of Cologne. The festival has been active for almost 30 years, and since 1987 it has presented every year performances from Germany and one other European nation. In 2010 the visiting nation was Finland, and the festival was composed out of 14 Finnish and German performances, with accompanying workshops and discussions.

Finland was presented in the program for example by the baffling and ingenious *Conte D'amour* by Nya Rampen and Institutet, the touching and skillful *Anatomia Lear* by Anatomia ensemble and the desperate party of *Bakkantit 3* by Und er libet. From Germany there was a participatory game structure *Express Fight Club* by post theater, a minimalist choreography based on a massacre scene from the movie Bonnie and Clyde called *memor i am* by Deter/Müller/Martini and an exactly timed verbal play *Schwarzes Tier Traurigkeit* by studiobuehne.ensemble.

The festival is directed by **Dietmar Kobboldt**, who has been working with it since the beginning. **Tim Mrosek**, also the director of *Schwarzes Tier Traurigkeit*, works as the dramaturge of the festival. The two sat down to reveal their thoughts about the festival. Kobboldt started by accounting the history of *theaterszene europa*.

”The festival started in 1982 as a German student festival. After 4 years we wanted to have it a bit more international but not a real international festival. And we decided with Georg Franke, the former director of the theater, to try the binational approach. We started in 1987 with Poland, and at that time it wasn't the Poland you have today.

Some years are especially memorable to me, for example the Israeli-German festival. It was interesting

that the discussions were not about the German history and the Jews but about the actual on-going situation between the Jewish and the Palestinian Israelis. In 1990 we had the German-German festival. The wall had come down some months before and the reunion was some months later. And during our British-German festival in 1997 Forced Entertainment played for the first time in Germany.”

”Step by step, year after year it became more professional. It’s not student theater anymore, but if we find wonderful experimental and great student theaters we would invite them, that is still possible. And normally, except for some special performances, 70-80 percent of our audience are students”.

In addition to the fruitful idea of mapping every year the most interesting performances from one country, the festival also provides an especially good meeting place for artists. The invitation to perform includes a wish (or almost an obligation) to stay for the whole week, organize a workshop connected to the performance and its methodology, see all the other performances if possible, take part in the other groups' workshops and attend the various discussions held during the week.

”We hope that there will be a lot of new relationships, for theater work especially. If you just come in for your performances, maybe you get to know the staff, but we think that’s not enough”, says Kobboldt.

Mrosek continues: ”There should be even more input from everyone. There could be also more workshops. Maybe we should do a second festival for them, or have two or three days within the festival with only workshops. It would be great if everyone were able to attend as many of them as possible. I think its one of the most important aspects of the festival that you get not only to see the performances but also to get to know why and how the artists do them and get to learn from that. Through that you can get a new perspective on the work you do yourself. Or learn new techniques.”

It is tempting to ponder if organizing the festival will create a bigger picture of the European theater scene. Are there certain characteristics in different areas that become visible through the performances? Is there something that unites us as Europeans? Kobboldt says that one European theater scene does not exist.

”Sometimes just inside one country its very, very different. What we try to find out is what is the new

independent theater in Europe. Not the established independent theater but a new one. If we take for example a group like Rimini Protocol - one of their first performances, when they were still students, was invited to the festival. Now it would be difficult to invite them. In a way it would be great, but its not really what we try to do. We just look for *what could be*, not what is. What could be the future of theater. Rimini Protocol is the present of the theater. So what could there be five years from now?"

Mrosek finds the mission of the festival a paradox: "I think you cannot predict the future. We will never know if what we now think is the future of theater will actually be the future of theater. The only thing you can say is that maybe some groups who come here change a little how theater is perceived. And maybe some groups won't, there is no guarantee for that. Its like a quest without an end."

When asked about the finnish scene, Kobboldt appears enthusiastic. He says it definitely possesses its own personal characteristics: "Performance studies started in Finland quite late compared to other parts of Europe. Especially here in Germany a lot of discussion about post-dramatic theater went on earlier. It was necessary, but after two or three years it was boring. So you in Finland had a wonderful situation, you could start your new work with the results of these discussions as your basis. A lot of theater you do is very physical - its not brainy but physical - its fresh, and with a lot of humour. Its also totally different from the things we have seen in Germany or France or Great Britain."

Kobboldt and Mrosek discuss the effect of **Hans-Thies Lehmanns** *Postdramatic Theater* on the professional scene. Mrosek concludes that the use of theory is a matter of personal taste.

"People who do physical theater are as important as people who do contemporary playwright theater or dance. Or the post-dramatic guys, Rimini Protocol and so on. Actually there is no truth. Its obvious. My problem with that kind of book is that it tries to tell the truth, but it only sums up tendencies and developments that have come rather naturally."

"For lot of people in Mid-Europe it has been the bible", Kobboldt continues.

"But no one has to believe in it", states Mrosek.

The future of the festival seems as promising as its past has been satisfying. The university provides the infra-structures and the city of Cologne the funding for the artistic work. Next years visiting nation has not yet been decided, but Kobboldt gives a hunch:

”It will probably be some part of the former Yugoslavia, possibly Croatia or Serbia. We will start working with it when this year is done.”

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